

Strategies for Living Together as Friends

Twenty-six people spent a week together at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota, in each of two summers (1999 and 2000), exploring Living Faithfully in the United States today. They were women and men of six religious traditions – Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Native American – Americans of diverse ethnic backgrounds - African, European, Japanese, Mexican, Native, Palestinian, South and Southeast Asian. Many issues were discussed, and the following ideas for working together were developed.

A strategy for a common project

We talked about one very specific model for building mutually supporting inter-religious communities, one that is goal oriented and focuses on undertaking a common project. In brief, it involves five steps.

Initially, get the “lay of the land.” What is the community like? Who lives there? How does its geographical location affect its life? Who are the leaders? Who controls community resources, and how does the community operate?

Define the urgent issues based on widely-held priorities, community sensitivities, long- and short-term needs, and select one or two issues to work on.

Develop a strategic plan that includes appropriate goals and steps for reaching them, procedures, communication methods and networks, milestones which will demonstrate progress, and other measures of success/failure.

Plunge in, work faithfully together on the proposed project, make the necessary compromises and meet the challenges that arise. Be sure that those working together stay connected to share stories, frustrations, updates, encouragement.

Complete and evaluate the project. What has changed? What are the resulting attitudes, realities? What has been accomplished? What remains to be done? Celebrate project completion and appropriate closure.

More general strategies

We also identified more general strategies that can be helpful in addressing divisive issues or problems that arise in the course of building supporting relationships among our religious traditions.

Recognize that strategies to address issues should vary according to context. Some of us live in a small rural parish or temple, others in large urban areas. The issues will differ, as will the ways of addressing them.

Recognize that there are many ways of experiencing another's religious tradition: tell stories, invite one another to services and rituals, discuss ideas and practices. Make room for the experiential as well as the intellectual.

Focus on how a person of faith lives his/her life, rather than engaging in debates or arguments about the truths on which our lives are based.

Media often ask a religious leader or an inter-religious organization, "What is your position on such and such an issue?" When this occurs, one might consider if it would be helpful to show a range of the views existing within a community on the issue, not all of which may be in harmony with one another. One might also consider if it is always necessary to seek (or to have) consensus on issues.

Get to know one another as people — build relationships first. An initial focus on theological or philosophical issues may bring premature stalemate. It is better to enable personal relationships first. There is a need for institutional relationships, and for people to come out of their institutions and get to know each other as people. Personal relationship can be most useful in bringing religious leaders together to solve problems, or in generating a community-wide strategy.

Maintain noble silence. Sometimes silence is the best policy, especially when there is a lot of anger around a particular issue or situation. However, we are not advising that anyone refrain from speaking out in the face of obvious injustice. We recognize that sometimes issues emerge in an inter-religious context that must be dealt with before any other progress can be made.

Announce each other's events and observances as a concrete way of supporting each other.

Respect each other, even if you have questions about one another's practices or beliefs. It is always right to discuss issues, and sometimes necessary to raise concerns. But do not encourage disrespectful remarks about another as a person because of her or his religious choices. Engaging in such personal attacks is hurtful and is a form of unfaithfulness.

Attend to the interrelations between religion and culture. Give significant and sufficient attention to a group's cultural practices and their inter-relation with religious observance. Pay attention to family ties within ethnic communities, and how this relates to their religious practice.

In some cases it may be helpful to put community first, before religious practice - to recognize that we are part of the same community, though we may practice different religions. Especially in cases when the aim is to address a particular community problem, difference in religious belief, styles of prayer, ways of practice, or in positions on divisive issues are much less important than tending to the community in which we all live.

We have noted that in all of our traditions institutional life can become very narrow in its focus on the particularity of our own tradition or branch of a tradition. Programs often focus on building up the life of a particular denomination, sect or way within a tradition. To foster mutually supporting relationships among our religious traditions, it will be important to make engaging in a broader community an integral part of the programming of our institutions.

Make a list of the most common incidents or events that encourage people to enter into inter-religious conversation – for instance, when a person of one culture or religion moves into a neighborhood where the majority is of another religion or culture; interfaith marriage; etc. Develop strategies for how you can respond.

Tailor your approaches to inter-religious situations so that they are sensitive to the feelings and mores of the people you are trying to serve.

Do not be afraid to develop supporting relationships of faith, and to share spiritual support with one another, across lines of religious tradition.